

Involving Local Civic, Business, and Religious Organizations

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OBJECTIVES

The objectives of involving the community in mock election activities are to:

1. garner support for mock election activities.¹
2. secure a positive community atmosphere for mock election activities.
3. lay the framework for future mock election activities.
4. develop community relations skills in students, such as phoning, writing, and meeting with community contacts.²


METHODS

The following steps will contribute to a successful effort to involve the community in your mock election events:

1. List your needs.
2. Begin your search.
3. Attend public meetings and appearances.
4. Catalogue your contacts.
5. Recruit help from schools, teachers, students, and parents.
6. "Sell" the mock election.
7. Contact public officials and community leaders.
8. Contact businesses.
9. Contact religious organizations.
10. Contact historians.
11. Explore other community resources.
12. Follow up.

1. The New Standards for Civics and Government recommend that students be able to explain the distinctive traits of American society and how they differentiate the American society from other societies. One of the traits the Standards recognize is the importance of volunteerism in American life. Students need to understand that as they ask local civic, business, and religious organizations to volunteer for their mock election projects, they in turn should volunteer some of their time to local groups and organizations. See the new standards, Section II.

2. The new standards suggest that students gain a deeper understanding of their community and their local government because most civic interaction takes place at this level. This includes asking community members and local officials to speak with students. See the new standards, Section III.

 **M**y advice to mock election organizers and coordinators is "cast down your bucket." You will be amazed at what it comes up with. This chapter is an overview of just how you can fill your bucket with both people and ideas.

1. List your needs.

Make a list of everything you need to make your project successful, fun, and memorable. Don't hold back; remember that community members, businesses, and organizations have vast resources that often remain unused because no one has asked for them. For example, moving voting booths can be a problem, but local truck rental centers might provide a rental truck for free if you ask. (Other sources for rental trucks might include moving companies, lumber yards, shipping companies, and even local delivery people.) Other examples of "in-kind" donations might include food, office supplies, decorations, and film.

Put together a tight budget that includes all of your needs, and format it so that you can present it to potential sponsors.

2. Begin your search.

The "Government Agencies" section of the phone book is a good place to start your search for potential partners. Also look through the Yellow Pages, specifically consulting such sections as "Education (Consultants and Services, Programs, etc.)," "Political Organizations and Candidates," and "Associations (Business and Professional, Education, Youth)." In both instances you are searching for names and ideas. Look for organizations that can help you in your outreach efforts, such as the library and educational consultants, as well as potential partners such as businesses and associations. Call the civic organizations you have discovered to introduce yourself and the mock election, and to explore possibilities for mutually beneficial relationships.

Don't forget that many phone books list the public library under the name of the facility and not as an agency. The library is a very important resource as the reference librarian frequently has access to lists of all the local businesses, civic, religious, and governmental organizations. Also contact the local offices of the Chamber of Commerce and the Better Business Bureau which will have lists of the area's business leaders.

If you are uncomfortable making blind phone calls, write letters—or have students write letters—to local organizations and follow up your letters with phone calls. In all your dealings with the public, whether they be through phone calls, letters or meetings, remember to emphasize the nonpartisan, win-win nature of the mock election. This means that students learn to be active informed citizens as proposed in the new National Standards for Civic and Government and that the community will experience the benefits of students empowered to work within the system. Don't get frustrated if you don't reach your contact on the first one or two calls. Be persistent!

3. Attend public meetings and appearances.

Perhaps the best way to develop successful partnerships is through speeches and appearances. Community members often respond better to personal introductions and contacts than blind letters and phone calls. Expand your network by attending community events (such as City Council meetings, town meetings and meetings of local organizations) and telling the public about your project. Most meetings have a public forum at the beginning or end of the meeting which is open to all community members including students. Call the organization (listed in the phone book) for meeting schedules.

4. Catalogue your contacts.

You should invest in a file or box of file cards to keep track of the names and numbers of all the resource people you contact, particularly those you need for a successful event and those that express interest in your project. This list will be the backbone of your operation. If you have a computer, these names should be entered into a database so that letters can be generated easily.

5. Recruit help from schools, teachers, students, and parents.

Before reaching out to students and parents, you first need the support of local school board trustees and district superintendents. Check the school district office for the names and addresses of the appropriate people and write them a letter asking for their support. Include in your letter information about the mock election, its purposes and benefits, its national cooperating organizations and, if appropriate, community members and/or organizations that are already supporting the project. Remind educators about the new National Standards for Civics and Government, as well as the proposed History standards, which recommend that students be actively engaged in the learning process and that students relate historical events to current issues and potential future outcomes.

Once you have the support of the administration, ask local school districts, both private and public, to distribute letters to all teachers, students, and parents about the mock election. Include information about your event, what resources and assistance you need, and how community organizations and businesses can help (be sure to include requests for contacts as well as a list of resources). This method can help you reach at least half of all households in your community and maybe as many as 80%. The result is going to be a well-informed public and a reservoir of potential resources.

Ask students to follow up with their parents: Do their parents have suggestions for potential partnerships? Do they have any community contacts? Where do they work? Would they be willing to meet with the president or the owner of their company to discuss the mock election?

6. “Sell” the mock election.

As you begin to contact potential cooperators, sell the “sizzle”—the many positive aspects of your mock election efforts. Tell them about your activity, its objectives, how many people will be involved and other organizations that have donated goods and services. Highlight the tremendous success the program has enjoyed previously in your community

(if mock election events have taken place in previous years) or in other communities throughout the United States as well as the fact that the national organization is backing your event.

Be sure to mention the benefits of participation to potential partners: free advertising, access to voters or potential customers, public recognition, and an opportunity to recruit new members.

When organizations agree to help with your project, be sure to mention them in all of your materials. As a way of thanking them, give your sponsors as much publicity and recognition as you can. They can be terrific public supporters of your event! For those who donate more than \$100, consider recognizing them at an awards ceremony as outstanding supporters of youth education.

Also keep the community informed of your progress using a “Dollar Thermometer”—a large sign, featuring a thermometer design, that you post in a public place to keep track of the amount of donations you receive. As community members see the thermometer “rise,” they will be more likely to jump on the bandwagon!

7. Contact public officials and community leaders.

You need to develop a strategy for contacting public officials. The chain of command is relatively simple. Start at the top. Go to the mayor, the director of the Chamber of Commerce, or the head librarian. Using this approach you can get your message across quickly and decrease the chances that you are misunderstood.

If you don’t get any response from the top, try the next level down: community outreach directors, community relations personnel, and so on. Do you know anyone with a contact in the official’s office? Would he or she introduce you to their contact?

Perhaps the City Council or County Board of Supervisors would publicize mock election activities with local promotions. Public officials can also help by endorsing the mock election in public service announcements or community meetings, making public speeches at your event, serving as panelists or helping to register new voters. The mock election provides great (and free!) public relations for community leaders.

8. Contact businesses.

Businesses are also a great source of help. (You can use the same procedures as described in method 7 to contact businesses.) As you involve more and more businesses, the public will become increasingly aware of the mock election and your event inspiring greater public interest and morale. Every business has something to bring to the table, so don't curtail your creativity. They might help you support and publicize your project by purchasing an advertisement in a local newspaper announcing their support of your project. Businesses can also:

- ★ sponsor mock election events.
- ★ display flyers about mock election events or information on marquees.
- ★ donate paper for flyers.
- ★ decorate event facilities.
- ★ provide volunteers.
- ★ donate money.
- ★ supply prizes/awards.
- ★ provide refreshments.
- ★ donate photographic supplies for student photographers.

Consult your original list of needs and brainstorm creative providers for your necessities. If you need publicity, perhaps restaurants could hand out flyers with the meals they serve. If you need funds, perhaps students could pick up trash in a community auditorium or amphitheater for pay. If you need access to copying machines, perhaps the local library could offer their copying facilities in return for a book donation.

9. Contact religious organizations.

It's easy to obtain a list of religious leaders from the phone book or library. Religious organizations are usually eager to take part in this type of activity and have tremendous enthusiasm and manpower at their disposal. They can provide participants, volunteers, judges, locations, funding, community contacts, and many other resources.

You may also want to contact the local newspaper's city desk editor and ask the editor which reporter is handling the religious service listing. Contact that reporter, explain to him or her what the mock election is and what you are doing, and ask him or her for suggestions of whom to contact. Newspapers have enormous contact lists that could be valuable to you in enlisting community members in your project. Don't forget to enlist newspaper staff as potential judges, sources of questions for quiz team competitions, classroom speakers, and panelists for debates or speeches.

10. Contact historians.

Another frequently untapped resource is the community historian. Historians can give interesting and insightful lessons about the local area. Senior citizens can also relate stories about meaningful political events. Perhaps you could organize a panel of speakers to talk about political issues of the past. Senior citizens and the community historian might sit on the panel; perhaps the event could even take place in a senior-citizen home. Ask senior citizens to take part in other mock election activities as well.

11. Explore other community resources.

Other community members and groups can provide services including facilities, volunteers, and special knowledge. You may wish to approach:

- ★ **local theaters or malls.** Think how much more exciting your event might be if held in a venue such as these.
- ★ **photography clubs.** Ask a local photography club to help document the event. They might mount their pictures on poster board and display the posters in nearby malls or frequently-visited areas (such as bus stations, bank windows or the post office). This could be great advertising for the mock election as well as for the photography club.
- ★ **police officers.** Ask off-duty guards or police officers to volunteer at your event.

- ★ **the League of Women Voters.** They can also assist by helping to organize events, or providing volunteers and a wealth of information about candidates, their positions, public officials, voting requirements, and Congressional districts.
- ★ **local colleges or universities.** Representatives of these institutions can provide facilities, moderate debates, judge contests, provide contacts, advise you on how best to market the mock election, or provide statistical data and explanations.
- ★ **veterans' organizations.** The Veterans of Foreign Wars or the American Legion can provide flags for any event and may also help with volunteers.
- ★ **special needs organizations.** Members of these organizations or other community members can usually provide assistance with translating sign language or providing Braille materials. Contact your school district's communications specialist or speech teacher for help in locating these services. Hospitals can also provide wheelchairs or other specialty items for handicapped participants.

12. Follow up.

The last thing you should do is write a letter to those who have helped with your event. Invite them to attend your event to see the results of their help and support. To those who didn't participate, draft a letter asking them to consider assisting next year. Perhaps students could be assigned this task.

The National Student/Parent Mock Election has the potential to be a community-wide event that can bring pride to citizens and students alike. All of these suggestions can enable you to reach almost every individual in the area with minimal funds and time. Use what is available in your community and you will most likely find a vast amount of support just waiting to be lifted aboard.

In Lafayette, Indiana, a group of eighth graders and their teachers participating in the 1995 National Student/Parent Mock Election ACTIONS project raised \$500,000 in in-kind contributions and cash, with which they will build a community skating rink in the hopes of reducing violence in their community.

Cast down your bucket!